Democracy under the *kothornos*: Thucydides and Xenophon on Theramenes[1]

Lucia Sano, Breno Battistin Sebastiani

Abstract: We analyze the political actions of Theramenes as described by Thucydides (during the coup of 411 BCE) and Xenophon (under the Thirty, 404–3 BCE) to map the features that converged to make him a paradigmatic character in the ancient Greek political imaginary. Xenophon, at least, may have been an eyewitness to the facts reported and both historians have conditioned Theramenes' portrayal by later authors. We highlight the traits of Theramenes that fostered his identification as either the quintessence of the turncoat or as a role-model for moderate politics. Our goal is also to discuss the implications of his political stances for the configuration of Athenian democracy in the last quarter of the 5th century and how this may still help us consider our own democratic system and its flaws.

Keywords: Thucydides, Xenophon, Theramenes, Athens.

Theramenes is a most controversial character in Athenian history, being, according to Thucydides, both one of the main leaders of the oligarchic coup of 411 BCE, as well as an opponent who acted to end it. He is also an important agent in Xenophon's *Hellenika*, mainly due to his involvement in the trial of the generals of the Battle of Arginusae in 406 and his being part of the Thirty Tyrants, who he ultimately rebelled against, leading to his execution in 404. All these shifts during the final years of the Peloponnesian War and the violent regime of the Thirty led to interpretations of Theramenes' political trajectory, produced only a few years after his death, that are profoundly conflicting: in the *Constitution of the Athenians,* we find a very sympathetic portrayal of him, but the opposite can be seen in two speeches made by Lysias (12 and 13), and even the *Hellenika* initially portrays him as a villain before going on to depict him as an example of virtue.

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Political figures who adapt their conduct according to circumstances arising from crisis are not a phenomenon restricted to Antiquity, but have been seen throughout history and are familiar to the citizens of most modern-day countries. Examining the contexts and political motivations behind such shifts in the case of Theramenes may provide us with a better judgment on some contemporary democratic practices and shed light on the broader political spectrum, ranging from open opportunism to necessary reparations. The past few years have witnessed a general rise in feelings of distrust in democracy, which once again brought into perspective the dangers of political polarization and of tyranny as its possible aftermath, a worrying scenario in which Theramenes once found his way to political power.

Thucydides' first mention of Theramenes is among the leaders of the movement that would become known as the Athenian Coup of 411, a particularly critical moment. For the first time in the city's reorganization on the democratic grounds advanced by Cleisthenes a century before, there was a decisive split between the popular faction and the oligarchs: "Theramenes, son of Hagnon, was the first among those who would bring down democracy (ἐν τοῖς ξυγκαταλύουσι τὸν δῆμον), a man not unskilled in speaking and thinking" (8.68.4).[2] When narrating the final moments of the coup, the historian explicitly qualifies the occurrence as a *stasiasmos* ("sedition", 8.94.2), reinforcing the same idea when he states that "the city was in civil war" (πόλεώς τε στασιαζούσης, 8.95.2). The moment of *stasis* is also called a *metabole*, that is, a change, as Thucydides describes the movement that put an end to the coup and immediately delivered the conduct of public affairs to five thousand citizens, converting the city into a new type of government similar to an aristocracy ([ἐ]ν δὲ τῇ μεταβολῇ ταύτῃ, 8.98.1).[3]

The summer of 411, during which the coup took place in the city, was not, however, marked by cohesive leadership.[4] First, recognizing itself as the legitimate democratic unit of a city taken over by an opposing and numerically inferior faction, the Athenian army stationed in Samos revolted under the competent leadership of Thrasybulus and Thrasyllus (8.76). Then, faced with the threat

2 All translations are by the authors unless otherwise stated.

3 On the problem of the selection of the Five Thousand see Hurni 1991.

4 The coup of 411 can be detailed in six main phases: a) anti-democratic movement in Athens and extraordinary measures that allowed the dissolution of democracy; b) negotiations with Alcibiades; c) assembly in Colonus; d) initiatives by oligarchy leaders; resistance in Samos and reconciliation with Alcibiades; e) episodes of Etioneia, the revolt in Euboia and actions of people led by Theramenes; f) fall of the oligarchy. Since this text focuses on issues other than a detailed discussion of the political, social and economic aspects of the coup, readers interested in indications of reconstructions and fundamental discussions about the episode, as well as its background and immediate developments, may refer to Leão 2001, 52-8; Raaflaub 2006; Plácido 2008; Hurni 2010; Osborne 2010, 277; Shear 2011, 19-69; Gallego 2012, 2016; Bearzot 1979, 2006, 2012a (with a sharp critique against Shear's use of exclusively Anglophone bibliography), 2012b, 2013a, 25-81; Forsdyke 2013; Tritle 2013; Tuci 2013; Teergarden 2014, 17-30; Ober 2015, 454-458; Pritchard 2015, 98-9; 2016; Wolpert 2017; Zumbrunnen 2017; Paiaro 2018; Sebastiani 2018a, 2018b; Sebastiani et al, 2018.

posed by this contingent and filled with hopes of Persian aid and victory against the Lacedemonians, which had been awakened by Alcibiades' promises, some of the oligarchic leaders perceived turning against the movement that they had helped to trigger as a possible solution to the tensions brought about by the coup:

> These people were now starting to gather in groups and find fault with the state of affairs. Their leaders were men who were very much part of the oligarchy and held office within it, such as Theramenes son of Hagnon, Aristocrates son of Scelias and others. They had all been taking a leading role in affairs but were now seriously afraid, they said, of Alcibiades and the army in Samos, as well as of those sending delegations to Sparta, which they feared might inflict some harm on the city through acting without majority approval. They thought they should dispense with the excessively narrow oligarchy they had, and should instead demonstrate that the Five Thousand existed in reality and not only in name, and should establish the constitution on a more equal basis. But this form of words was just their political pretence (σχῆμα πολιτικόν). Most of them were drawn through personal ambition into a mode of behavior that is sure to end up destroying any oligarchy that emerges from a democracy. Right from the first day they not only all fail to consider themselves equals, but each thinks he deserves the very first place himself. Whereas under a democracy an election is held and a person can bear the result more easily, telling himself that he was not defeated by his peers. (8.89.2–4; translation by Mynott)

In this passage one reads the first decisive change of position on the part of Theramenes. The words are difficult to interpret; on one hand, the historian suggests that he

> exerted great pressure on the Four Hundred to publish the list of the Five Thousand, a fact that, coupled with the support that the hoplites gave him to establish the government of these Five Thousand, could mean that he allied with extremists in the fight against democrats, but that, in fact, he identified with a moderate constitution from the beginning. He would have moved away from the extremists when he understood the weak commitment they made to sharing the government with the Five Thousand, as it should have been agreed initially. (Leão 2001, 58; translation by the authors).

On the other hand, the way that Thucydides disqualifies his posture—"this form of words was just their political pretence (σχῆμα πολιτικόν)"—indicates a negative bias in the appreciation of Theramenes' attitude. Of those who were leading the coup, Antiphon would then suffer capital punishment (8.68.1), Peisander would take refuge in Deceleia (8.98.1) and Phrynichus would be murdered. These facts could have led Theramenes, unscathed and associated with an apparently moderate faction, to "act more boldly" (8.92.2).[5]

[5] Underlined excerpt of the quotation above. In Greek: οὐ τὸ † ἀπαλλαξείειν τοῦ ἄγαν ἐς ὀλίγους ἐλθεῖν, ἀλλὰ τοὺς πεντακισχιλίους ἔργῳ καὶ μὴ ὀνόματι χρῆναι ἀποδεικνύναι καὶ τὴν πολιτείαν ἰσαιτέραν καθιστάναι (8.89.2).

The political pretence unveiled by the historian indirectly associates Theramenes with Alcibiades, whose chameleonic behavior would have already been perceived by Phrynichus:

The rest of these thought the proposals viable and credible, but Phrynichus (who was still general) was totally dissatisfied with them. Alcibiades seemed to him to have no more desire for oligarchy than for democracy, as was indeed the case, and to be concerned only with finding some way of securing his own return at the invitation of his associates by destabilising (μεταστήσας) the existing order of things in the city. But their own overriding concern, he insisted, must be this—to avoid internal conflict (μὴ στασιάσωσιν). (8.48.4; transl. Mynott).

In Thucydides' understanding, Theramenes was one of the many opportunists who used popular opinion—the coup had been voted for, but under intimidation (8.67)—to, in association with other agents who may have been actually engaged in the cause that they defended, galvanize as much power and prestige as possible. The indirect association with Alcibiades becomes all the more ironic and critical when the historian reports that Theramenes was among those who most feared Alcibiades and the sailors.[6]

Xenophon's portrayal of Theramenes is much more ambiguous than Thucydides'. His character in the *Hellenika* shows how much the author leaves for his readers to judge on the facts he reports.[7] The representation of Theramenes' actions is undoubtedly negative, both in the episode of the trial of the generals who participated in the Battle of the Arginusae, and in the negotiation of Athens' surrender to the Spartans at the end of the Peloponnesian War. He is, however, much more positively characterized when opposing Critias in the leadership of the Thirty Tyrants. This change was often justified by a time discrepancy: there is an old hypothesis that the section of the *Hellenika* that goes until the end of the War was composed a few years afterwards but that the author would then have resumed the narrative only decades later. In this hiatus a strong restoration of the figure of Theramenes in Athens would have occurred[8] and resulted in his representation by Xenophon as a "moderate ideal oligarch", a characterization more clearly seen in the *Athenian Constitution*. Besides the temporal aspect, however, Xenophon's particular mode of narrative composition—favoring an episodic structure—would allow a view of Theramenes as both the "bad guy" earlier in the narrative and the "good guy"

6 For the discussion of the role of sailors as a constituent force of Athenian democracy and the critique of the old ideological view that such actors would only be the poorest citizens, whose attitudes and requisitions would tend to radicalisms with the potential to transform Athenian democracy into a mob rule, see Pritchard 2019, 83-4.

7 Flower 2015, 119 notes that Xenophon's narrative style allows the reader to be active in the construction of meaning and character, by leaving them to realize what kind of people the agents involved are and to what measure their actions are appropriated. See also Sordi 1981; Bearzot 2012b.

8 The so-called "Theramenes myth"; see Harding 1974; Engels 1993.

later. If, however, the episodes of the generals' trial, the surrender negotiation, and Theramenes' own trial are not read independently, but in a continuous narrative, a very problematic portrayal emerges.

Theramenes' shifts, albeit recurrent, appear less opportunist in the *Hellenika*, as his opposition of Critias' views and attitudes make him a *de facto* voice of reason. It is a common understanding that he represents, in his clash with Critias, an ideal that would have come from Xenophon himself, that of a moderate and just oligarchy, not to be confused with tyranny, and that his portrayal in this episode is completely restorative. The idea that Xenophon was a most committed oligarch, however, has been questioned in recent years, with the growing understanding that his work at various times represents democratic attitudes in a favorable way.[9] It is our understanding that this extradiegetic information should be mostly left aside, as it is unnecessary to the interpretation of what he reports concerning Theramenes.

Five years after the fall of the oligarchy, in 406, Theramenes was involved in another grievous situation for the city. Even though the occurrence was not qualified as *stasis* by Xenophon, the lawsuit against the generals of the Battle of Arginusae was to become a sign of profound change in the conduct of the democratic regime in Athens. Aggravated by the *demos*' wrath and suspicions caused by the fractures left open since 411, the lawsuit turned into a witch hunt against those momentarily perceived as responsible for the city's difficult situation at the end of the war. The trial was the preamble of a new coup, which again would count Theramenes among its main protagonists.[10]

At the end of section 6 of the first book of the *Hellenika*, Xenophon relates the main facts that led to the trial of the generals. The narrator states from the very beginning the motive that made the rescue impossible (a storm), and there is no internal focus on the generals in this passage of the narrative. The generals had decided that the trierarchs Theramenes and Thrasybulos and some taxiarchs should sail with 47 ships to rescue the damaged vessels and their men, a task that they could not fulfill due to the weather. So it was that the Athenians had won the battle but lost 25 ships with men (1.6.34). The news of the death of the castaways caused great commotion in Athens and all eight generals were deposed (1.7.1). In these circumstances, Xenophon re-

9 For a positive portrayal of democracy in Xenophon, see Gray 2004; Kroeker 2009; Lee 2017. Some conjectures led some experts to argue that Xenophon's support for the oligarchic factions in Athens would have resulted in him being part of the cavalry that operated under the Thirty Tyrants. This is a hypothesis from the end of the 19th century that still has adherents; see Bevilacqua 2018, 472. For the evidence, Delebecque 1957, 61-4. The representation of cavalry under the command of the Thirty is, however, ambiguous; although the cavalry had supported the coup, there is also some suggestion that part of it would have defected to the democratic resistance (Diod. 24.33.4 and *Hell*. 2.4.25).

10 On the decisive performance of the *demos* in the episode see Sano 2018. On instrumentalization for political purposes—in this case, the letter that Theramenes would have used for his own acquittal—see Burckhardt, 2000; Gazzano 2020, 59-60.

ports that only six of them returned to the city, probably already fearing the aftermath of the failed rescue mission. Subsequently, it is said that a certain Archidamos, who was a leader of the people, accused one of the generals in court, Erasinides, for his actions as general, while also claiming that he kept funds from the Hellespont that belonged to the people. These allegations resulted in Erasinides' arrest. After that, the remaining five generals were summoned to speak to the Council about the battle and the storm that would have prevented the rescue mission (1.7.3). Once the hearing ended, it was decided that the generals would be arrested and tried by the people.

Then there was an Assembly in which the generals were accused mainly by Theramenes.[11] Xenophon also states that there were several testimonies in favor of the generals (1.7.7) and that they were almost acquitted, information that is relevant because it shows that the *demos*' initial attitude towards the defendants was correct. The generals claimed that, in order to be able to concentrate on attacking the enemy, their trierarchs, one of whom was Theramenes himself, were in charge of the rescue. They explained that even these, however, should not be seen as responsible, since the mission was not at all possible due to the storm (1.7.5–6). The assembly ended without any concluding deliberation because it was already late in the day. The Council was then charged with determining how the trial would proceed. It is important to note here that, according to Xenophon, when Theramenes was attending the rules of democratic institutions without resorting to subterfuges, he failed in his intention to persuade the people that the generals were guilty of neglect.

It is in the interim between this first Assembly and the Council meeting that Theramenes' actions can be considered infamous:

> After this came the feast of the Apatouria, in which fathers and their relatives meet together. Now Theramenes and his followers suborned many men to wear black cloaks and have their hair shorn close during the festival so that, when they went to the Assembly, it might appear that they were relatives of the men who had died; they also persuaded Kallixenos to accuse the generals in the Council (1.7.8, transl. Marincola).

From Xenophon's report one can understand that these two initiatives by Theramenes promoted change in the people's disposition towards the generals, a turning point so decisive that it led to their execution. After the Council met, its decision to comply with Kallixenos' proposal was presented in the Assembly. The proposal stated that two ballot boxes would be arranged for

[11] Xenophon does not say what motivates Theramenes to accuse the generals nor does he record the content of his speech. Two influential texts in the modern interpretation of the trial raised hypotheses: Grote (1861) suggested that Theramenes had contradicted the generals in relation to the actual conditions of the storm; Cloché (1919) conjectured that he might have accused them of delaying too much the decision for the rescue, to the point where it had become impossible.

the *demos* to vote for or against capital punishment for all the generals and that they should not be allowed time for defense, based on the allegation that they had already had the opportunity to speak for themselves during the previous Assembly.

At this point Euryptolemus spoke for the first time, initially claiming the motion of Kallixenos to be illegal and so "some popular ones approved, but the crowd shouted (τὸ δὲ πλῆθος ἐβόα) that it would be terrible if someone prevented the people from doing what they wanted" (1.7.12).[12] When one Lyciscus stood up to further instigate the audience, stating that Euryptolemus and his supporters should also be judged as the generals had, then "the mass produced a new turmoil (ἐπεθορύβησε πάλιν ὁ ὄχλος), and they were constrained to withdraw the proposal" (1.7.13). Finally, when some *prytaneis* opposed the summary vote proposed by Kallixenos, again some of the people "shouted (οἱ δὲ ἐβόων) that those who tried to stop him should also be called to court" (1.7.15).

All *prytaneis* yielded to the pressure of public opinion, with Socrates being the only one not to accept the illegality, and Euryptolemus then resumed the defense of the accused, trying to show that they were victims of a conspiracy (ἐπιβουλευόμενοι, Xen.*Hell*.1.7.18). Xenophon reports his speech (1.7.16-33)—the first long one in the narrative—, which is organized around the idea of obedience to the laws. He strives to persuade the people that the generals should be judged individually, claiming that the men could be prosecuted by two other laws: the decree of Cannonus, which established that those guilty of injuring the *demos* should be executed, their property confiscated and a tenth given to the Goddess; or that they could be accused also of sacrilege and betrayal, under the penalty of having their property confiscated, being executed and prevented from having a tomb in Attica. Euryptolemos also suggests that Theramenes and Thrasybulos might have to be prosecuted as well for failing to carry out the orders of the generals. The discourse ends with the statement that it would better to reward the victorious men with garlands than to punish them with death, persuaded by evil men (1.7.33).

Finally, the *prytaneis* allowed the generals to be judged immediately and jointly (1.7.34). As is well known, the Athenians came to regret voting for capital punishment very shortly afterwards and decided to prosecute those who had at that time deceived the people (1.7.35, τὸν δῆμον ἐξηπάτησαν). Kallixenos and four other men were arrested on this charge. Having managed to escape from prison, Xenophon states that Kallixenos returned to Athens but died of hunger because he was hated by everyone.

Although the historian does not state this explicitly, such attitudes are manifestations of great collective unrest, thus constituting a moment of *stasis*; not so much because there are positions for or against the generals, but because of the potential institutional and procedural laceration that the precedent of πράττειν

[12] On the meaning and implications of the *graphe paranomon*, see Carawan 2007. Aristophanes (*Ra*.534-541, 967-970) mocks the labile character of Theramenes in the Arginusae dossier, but without wry criticism. Rhodes 2006, 169.

ὃ ἂν βούληται ratified through the intimidating turmoil brought to the city. In such a scenario, sudden and conjectural voluntarism would take precedence over the norm. Between the lines of Xenophon's critical report, however, one can find what this would be considered in another band of the Athenian political-ideological spectrum, with all the bonuses and burdens that this implies: that is, a legitimate manifestation of the democratic debate—raised, in this case, by Theramenes' strategy of pitting public opinion against the generals. It has already been suggested that it was not Theramenes' intention to convict the generals to death, since before 406 no Athenian general had been executed in the city (Roberts 1977, 109). One may suppose that he had not foreseen such a course of action and that Kallixenos had to a large extent acted alone, which could also explain why Theramenes was not one of the men accused to deceive the people by promoting the execution. It is impossible to establish if this was the case but it is a possibility. A few years later he would again set forth a violent motion that once again grew out of his control: the rise of the Thirty Tyrants.

Theramenes played an important role after the Athenian defeat at Aegospotami in 405, which concluded the Peloponnesian War with the victory of Sparta over the fleet of Athens (*Hell.* 2.2.16). At a point when the Athenians could not even discuss the possibility of tearing down part of their walls—a man was arrested for merely proposing this and, subsequently, a decree was passed preventing new similar proposals (2.2.15)—, Theramenes suggested sending him to Lysander to find out if the Spartans simply wanted a demonstration of good faith from the Athenians with the demolition of the walls or if they intended to enslave them. He also persuaded his fellow citizens to choose him as ambassador—either because his popularity was on the rise again or, with all the casualties of the war, there was no other politician with stature enough to earn the Athenians' trust.[13]

He then remained with the Spartan admiral for over three months, "waiting for the moment when the Athenians would accept any proposal, since all their supplies of wheat would have been consumed" (2.2.16). Xenophon reports that, in the presence of Lysander's peace proposal formalized by Theramenes, "some opposed it, but many approved it and ended up voting to accept peace" (2.2.22). The city's *soteria* slogan was much more pressing in 404 than it was in 411, and it was systematically exploited again to undermine the foundations of popular resistance and democracy itself (Bearzot 2013a, 190 and chiefly 2013b). Theramenes' behavior, in the episode, can be seen as that of a double agent[14] or even of a traitor to his countrymen.[15]

[13] On the episode see Bearzot 1991, 2001, 2012b.

[14] Such representation may, however, have the character of a topical accusation, that is, a rhetorical procedure *ad hominem* carried out whenever it was desired to accuse someone along similar lines. In the fourth century, for example, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Phocion and Demetrius Phalereus will be described in similar terms. See Leão 2010, 2018, for Phocion and Demetrius respectfully.

[15] The source of Aristotle and Diodorus, however, preserved a more favorable appreciation of Theramenes: Leão 2001, 68-9.

This portrayal is consistent with that of Thucydides and with that made by Xenophon in the episode of the trial of the generals: he is a man who puts his own interests first. The narrative of Xenophon on this point, however, has many gaps. In fact, a modern reader of the *Hellenika* wonders why Theramenes' involvement in the trial after the battle of Arginusae did not result in the end of his political career and why the *demos* would have chosen a suspicious figure like him to negotiate their fate with the Spartans at such a critical moment. Some have attempted to supplement this gap with other sources, mainly with Lysias's speeches (12 and 13) and the so-called "Theramenes papyrus" (Engels 1993; Loftus 2000; Bearzot 2001). Both sources indicate that Theramenes claimed he had a strategy to negotiate the best conditions with the Spartans, but that he could not reveal them to the people, allegedly because this secrecy would benefit the Athenians themselves.[16] Theramenes was once again undermining the democratic practices by acting against its fundamental principles and promoting confusion and misinformation among his fellow citizens (Bearzot 2013a, 46ff)—a strategy that proved to be convincing. Upon returning after the three unnecessary months spent among the Spartans, he was able to gain a "carte blanche" to negotiate the surrender of Athens with nine other ambassadors. The permission he received to "save the city", although against the will of the democratic opponents, was costly for Athens, which, on his advice, accepted all the terms of surrender presented by Sparta.

Xenophon then proceeds to report the establishment of the government of the Thirty Tyrants in 404 and its escalation of violence without failing to point out that the association with Sparta ensured their power and how they were also guided by the interest in maintaining good relations with the city.[17] Initially selected to carry out a reform of the constitution, the thirty men continually postponed the task and established a Council and other institutions in an arbitrary manner, beginning shortly afterwards to act as tyrants (2.3.11–3): first, they decided to execute the sycophants; then, potential political enemies, in order to be allowed "to govern as they wished" (2.3.13); and, having received a Spartan garrison that guaranteed their safety and confiscated the citizens' weapons (2.3.20), they began to condemn men for personal enmity and greed.

In this scenario, Gray (1989) analyzes how Xenophon narrates the end of the friendship between Theramenes and Critias, whom the author represents as the main actor responsible for the greedy and violent behavior of the Thirty. Theramenes' opposition started when aristocratic men well regarded by him, but also by the people, began to be executed (2.3.15). Critias justified these ac-

[16] According to Lysias (12.68ss), Theramenes claimed to be able to negotiate a surrender that would not involve returning hostages, the destruction of the walls or delivery of ships, but he actually would have offered the Spartans to tear down the walls of Piraeus and to dissolve the constitution. It is necessary to consider the judicial context in which this information on Theramenes is being presented, though, one in which it was interesting to portray him in the most negative way. On the episode see also Bearzot 1991.

[17] *Hell.* 2.3.13-14; 2.3.25; 2.3.34.

tions by stating that the maintenance of power depended on the elimination of its opponents. For Theramenes, however, they were doing "two completely contradictory things" (2.3.19) with the establishment of a government that was both violent and weaker than the ones it governed, and he advocated for an expansion of political participation not limited to the number of three thousand men, as proposed by the Thirty and accepted by the Council. He also refused to choose a foreigner at random and execute him with a view to confiscating his assets.

At this point the Thirty considered that Theramenes "was trying to prevent them from acting as they pleased" (οἱ δ᾽ ἐμποδὼν νομίζοντες αὐτὸν εἶναι τῷ ποιεῖν ὅ τι βούλοιντο), spreading the idea by word of mouth. This move resulted in the accusation of treason made by Critias. Xenophon then presents the reader with a speech of accusation and defense; these are the first long-recorded speeches since Euryptolemo's in the episode of the generals' trial. The clash presupposes, again, a context similar to that of a *stasis*: Critias defines his own place of speech stating that "we have always been openly hostile to the people" (Xen.*Hell*.2.3.28: ἡμεῖς φανερῶς ἐχθροὶ τῷ δήμῳ γεγενήμεθα) and he resumes the accusation that he had already weighed against Theramenes, that he was in charge of collecting the shipwrecked in Arginusae without fulfilling it. In addition to a delayed reckoning, Critias' strategy is to insist on the mutable, that is, treacherous (2.3.29)[18] character of the adversary to disqualify his refractory attitude to the excessive violence on the part of the Thirty and to remove him from the scene, something he was able to accomplish (2.3.50–6).

As a central argument for the disqualification, Critias characterizes Theramenes as the quintessence of the turncoat, reminding him of the pejorative nickname of *kothornos* (2.3.30–1), given to him because this type of shoe would fit both right and left foot without distinction: initially being one of the leaders of the Four Hundred in 411, he would have been the first to launch the people against the oligarchs once he perceived the growing opposition. Because he was trying something similar in 404/3, he was, according to Critias, showing his *eumetabolos* character—"prone to change" (σὺ δὲ διὰ τὸ εὐμετάβολος εἶναι, Xen. *Hell*.2.3.32)—, whose frequent *metabolai* (2.3.33) should inspire permanent caution, not trust. In trying to counter such accusations, Theramenes claims to have opposed the chiefs of the Four Hundred who wished to allow the city to be handed over to the Spartans, attacks Critias as a permanent enemy of both democracy and aristocracy and, finally, claims to have always been against the radicalization of democracy as well as the potential transformation of an oligarchy into tyranny (2.3.45–8): his choice would have always been centrality (a kind of moderate "third way"), from which he was not departing at that very moment (νῦν οὐ μεταβάλλομαι, "and now I will not change my position", 2.3.49).[19]

[18] This single paragraph gathers three expressions alluding to the posture attributed to Theramenes: ὡς προδότῃ, προδοσία, ὃν δ᾽ἂν προδιδόντα.

[19] As with the coup of 411 (above), also for reconstructions and recent discussions fundamental to the understanding of the historical problem regarding the Thirty Tyrants, see Leão 2001,

The narrator in the *Hellenika* does not make any judgment about it, leaving only in the character's mouth a positive self-appreciation. As already pointed out, most critics tend to see in the speech of Theramenes a thoughtful oligarch, who is represented very favorably by Xenophon. Bearzot (2013a, 143) is an exception: "one notes that Xenophon does not actually believe in this moderate image of Theramenes, as Thucydides did not: Theramenes' problem is not to achieve a moderate government, but to 'maintain the oligarchy'".[20] In fact, three times Critias affirms that the number of deaths ordered by the Thirty is justified by the need to eliminate opponents during the institution of a new regime; Theramenes does not disagree (2.3.37) but argues that they were executing men who were not their opponents and who would support an oligarchic government that did not turn against them (2.3.39–40). Besides that, his argument to oppose the confiscation of weapons is based on the importance of Athens remaining militarily strong and being an ally to Sparta rather than on the rights of its fellow citizens.

And although Critias' account of the generals' trial must be considered within a persecutory context, it is a clear record that at least part of the Athenians saw Theramenes as one of those responsible for the unjust decision to execute the generals. He replies that the generals had accused themselves when they suggested that, in fact, it would have been possible to rescue those shipwrecked despite the storm (1.3.32). The reader who is familiar with Book I of the *Hellenika*, however, knows that he is not as innocent as he claims. The only conclusion to be drawn from this part of his speech is that Theramenes lies. And persuasively. Perhaps he does the same when he claims (2.3.45) that the institution of the oligarchy in 411 was made by the people themselves because the Spartans would not negotiate an end to the war with the democrats, since this reason is not among those reported by Thucydides for the coup (8.70). Theramenes further declares that, since he realized that the Spartans still would not reduce their prosecution to war and that their collaborators wanted to hand over the city to their enemies, he prevented this from happening; but this speech sounds contradictory and somehow cynical, seen both in the light of the testimony that Thucydides offers of the growing democratic opposition that was already threatening to overthrow the 400, and of Xenophon's reports on how he acted to allow the Spartans to impose whatever conditions of surrender they wanted in 404.

As Dillery (1995, 146–63) points out, however, the narrative of the rise and fall of the Thirty Tyrants in the *Hellenika* observes an internal coherence and is a paradigm that also guides the understanding of the subsequent Spartan collapse in Greek politics. It is a programmatic account of an unjust regime that destroys itself for lack of self-control and, perhaps because of this, its agents become almost caricatural. In this narrative structure, Theramenes is only there to play the same role that Euryptolemos had played when the generals were judged: he

52-58; Németh 2006; Hurni 2010; Shear 2011; Gish 2012; Bearzot 1979, 2006, 2012, 2013a, 109-170; Teergarden 2014, 43-52; Ober 2015, 456-8; Gallego 2012, 2016; Sano 2018.

20 See also Bearzot 1994.

tried in vain to clarify to the people the conditions under which the rescue had not taken place and the reasons why the generals should be allowed individual judgments, while Theramenes tried to persuade Critias that the means of maintaining oligarchic power were not exacerbated by violence and control, which would only give rise to a greater number of opponents. Also in vain.

Let us now return to the idea that Xenophon's narrative may have been influenced by a campaign to enhance whatever qualities later oligarchs wanted to attribute to him. In fact, it is often suggested that the author manipulated his portrayal of Theramenes so that he could distance himself from the tyrants by promoting the idea of a moderate oligarchy that also fell victim to their violence. Theramenes began the propagation of the image of a moderate and legalist shortly after his death, as attested to by Lysias (12.64), an image that would be taken up by the tradition that goes from Aristotle (the author of the *Athenaion Politeia*) to Diodorus (or Ephorus) and reinforce the vision that associates the Athenian leader with a moderate posture.[21] Indeed, in the *Athenaion Politeia* and in Diodorus, the events narrated

> [...] are favorable to this group and, especially, to the figure of Theramenes, who they seek to dissociate from the excesses of the Thirty. Only in them does the dispute between the political groups appear (regarding the type of constitution to be adopted) and the information that the Thirty were established by Lysander with the opposition of Theramenes. [...] The source [of those authors], intending to disconnect Theramenes from the performance of the Thirty, would have anticipated in time his opposition to the extremists and to Lysander. This antagonism, moreover, would end up leading him to death, transforming him into a kind of martyr of the moderate cause. (Leão 2001, 68-9; transl. by the authors).[22]

From Thucydides to Lysias, we have an ascending and cumulative curve of accusations attributed to Theramenes, all the more serious when associated with the recognition of his practical and intellectual talent, even though the characterization produced by Xenophon is ambivalent, because it is marked by indirect accusations, often attributed intra-narratively to other characters.[23] But in the *Athenaion Politeia* the portrayal of the Athenian leader is drawn from an entirely favorable angle.

Of this appreciation, however, a large gap and an indirect indictment are particularly notable. The author of the text says nothing about the performance of

[21] For the critique of the tradition that is read in the Aristotelian treatise and its impact for the appreciation of Athenian democracy in the fourth century see Sancho Rocher 2004, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c. For the historian, it would be unlikely that there would be a third way consciously moderate, halfway between oligarchy and democracy, especially in a city and at a time when no ideological convictions, but rather personal reasons, would guide the conduct of agents like Theramenes.

[22] On Diodorus and the process of the Arginusae see Bearzot 2015.

[23] On the complexity of Xenophon's portrayal of Theramenes', see Wolpert 2002, 10.

the then trierarch in the legal process against the generals of the battle of Arginusae and seems to make every effort to erase his desertion, or only reproduces an already thinned-out version of these events, which puts in check the portrayal that emerges from Thucydides, Lysias and most of Xenophon's appraisals. More important than that, however, is that the text reveals another problem with the Athenian leader's conduct: he is associated with the destruction of democracy,[24] something already stated by Thucydides (8.68.4; above) and Lysias (τὴν ὑπάρχουσαν πολιτείαν καταλῦσαι, 12.70; also in 13.15 and 13.17) and alluded to by Xenophon when Critias accuses Theramenes of fomenting the *katalysis* of the *demos* in 411 (*Hell.*2.3.28: αὐτὸς δὲ τῆς τοῦ δήμου καταλύσεως). In *Ath.Pol.*28.5, one reads a version of these events that associates Theramenes' changes not to particular motivations, but to public interest. This main idea is, however, formulated through an expression that once again brings forward the subtext common to several accusations against him (qualified as slanders by the author—διαβάλλουσι): the author endeavors to present πάσας τὰς πολιτείας καταλύειν ("to dissolve all constitutions") in a positive manner, as a synonym for πάσας προάγειν ("to guide them all forward"),[25] in order to show Theramenes as someone capable of serving the city under all constitutions, as well as opposing those who acted illegally.

Assessing Theramenes' political trajectory during circumstances of *stasis* is as much a challenge for contemporary historians as it was for ancient authors. In other words, depending on how such a trajectory is viewed, we would be facing an opportunist or a legalist who tries to anticipate the potential catastrophes he foresees;[26] the leader that makes use of a moment of public *stasis* for his own benefit or who overrides the public interest over all others, even if this means putting his own life at risk; and the politician to be defined as inconsistent or as necessarily adaptive.

From an ethical point of view, none of the portrayals are favorable, on the contrary: in Thucydides' work this is due to the (anti-) ethics that underlies it; and in *Hellenika* it is because of the voluntary complicity or tolerance for regimes of exception and their implications. The events took place at critical moments when threats to dissolve or destabilize democracy had Theramenes among their main promoters. To find characters oriented by mutable political attitudes in oligarchic or monocratic situations is predictable, due to the very need for survival that such contexts of socio-political Darwinism necessarily imply. Finding them, however, in democratic contexts and, worse, embodied in agents of contemporary democracies, is not a simple triviality. Quite the contrary, it may be a sign that this democracy is fragile, especially when political figures can

[24] A very serious accusation, liable to capital punishment from 410, according to the Demophantus decree (Andoc.1.96-98). See Sebastiani 2018a, 2018b.

[25] For a detailed treatment of Theramenes in the *Ath.Pol.*, see Sebastiani and Leão, 2020.

[26] Somville (2004, 25) calls him a *fasciste modéré*. Plutarch (*Moralia* 824b) mentions him as an example of a politician who aims for agreement and can confer with both parties, without joining himself to neither (see Oudot, 2003).

swiftly shift the ideological views they promote, or their public commitments, without arousing suspicion.

From a political point of view, however, the issue requires greater nuance given the complexity of its circumstances. Frank and Monoson (2003 and 2009) bring Theramenes' attitudes closer to those of the *mesoi* citizens, whose political *phronesis* would be characterized precisely by a constant attention to legality. Although focused on the *Athenaion Politeia*, the researchers' perspective can also be applied to the other authors discussed in this paper. Although the idea is not explicitly mentioned in Thucydides or Xenophon, a similar political *phronesis* that would characterize such *mesoi* citizens could be seen as a key to understand Theramenes' actions and it would perhaps justify his most notorious trait—his adaptability, always aware of the new conjunctures forged by crucial events for the city such as the defeat in Sicily, the confrontation with the Spartan navy and the final defeat in the war.

Aware of the demands brought about by new events, Theramenes would embody a character who has no illusions about the possible resumption of the *patrios politeia* on pre-Peloponnesian War terms.[27] The circumstances were indeed far from favorable, considering the lack of resources such as the one that follows the defeat in Sicily and the pressure for an oligarchic government after Sparta's victory over Athens. It would be possible, then, to see in Theramenes not the unethical traitor but the tireless negotiator in search for the best possible conditions in the face of circumstances as overwhelming as they were uncontrollable. Furthermore, in 411 he would have supported oligarchs when he saw a way of saving the city in their actions but reasonably distanced himself from them and joined the democrats as soon as the established regime became unsustainable or started with abusive practices, so identifying his own salvation with that of the city. Something similar would again have happened with the Thirty.

But even that sequence of events, as politically justified as one may see it, can be read to this day as a cautionary tale. Ultimately, Xenophon makes the Athenian people responsible for choosing Theramenes as ambassador to negotiate the conditions of their surrender—thus granting power to the man who at that moment already intended to act in order to institute the oligarchy in the place of democracy. The fact that Xenophon does not record in the *Hellenika* the deliberation process that resulted in his selection emphasizes this. It is then simply the foolish decision of the people in choosing their representative, and not the discursive ability of Theramenes in presenting his supposed strategies, that is to blame for the disastrous situation in which the city found itself in the negotiations with Sparta. This is in line with Xenophon's stance when narrating the rise of the Thirty to a tyrannical position. All our sources on the Thirty say that they were appointed as a junta in a legal manner, but only Xenophon does not report the institution of *patrios politeia* as a condition imposed by the Spartans, thereby

[27] On the political uses of the idea of a moderate *patrios politeia* since the end of the V century see Bearzot 1979.

making the Athenians responsible for the oligarchic-tyrannical coup that city came to suffer at the hands of these men (2.3.2).[28]

Although Therames had tried to contain the violence of his fellow oligarchs, it is Thrasybulus who puts an end to the *stasis*, at the head of the armed democratic resistance and by instituting amnesty and pardon to those who had participated in the oligarchic government except for the Thirty themselves. Theramenes is unsuccessful because, as may have been the case in the trial of the generals, he was responsible for setting in motion a force more violent than he himself. In this sense, we think that Gray's (1989) interpretation of the clash between Critias and Theramenes, representing the decline of their friendship, is still interesting but can be seen from another perspective. According to her interpretation, Theramenes is the victim of the broken relationship and acts as a friend to Critias; once a paradigm of "misanthropy and ingratitude", he would change to one of "loyalty and constancy", exemplifying that betrayal does not mean opposing what friends do, but, on the contrary, that it should be seen as proof of friendship. His behavior, however, can also be seen as a demonstration that the tyrant (Critias) has no friends, and this fact is both his ruin and the ruin of those foolish enough to believe they could ally themselves with him. Lack of friendships is a well-marked element concerning the topic of tyranny, analyzed by Xenophon in *Hieron*.[29] Although the author addresses the issue from the perspective of the tyrant himself, it is clear that friendship presupposes some reciprocity and equality, and the tyrant cannot establish this type of relationship even with his own family members.

It is important to highlight, on the one hand, the contradictions of the supposed "moderate and restored Theramenes" in the light of a non-episodic reading of the *Hellenika*, because the reaffirmation of this positive portrayal, without any modulation, helps to erase his responsibility for the rise of a violent, greedy and arbitrary government. The fact that he was ultimately his own opponent and victim is not something that can completely redeem him. On the other hand, as Thucydides points out, for Athenian history to continue as a *ktema es aei*, an "acquisition for eternity", it must give something to our and future generations to think about. Thus, the account of Theramenes' political path can serve as a warning to those who wish to obtain political power for themselves (or to see in power those ideologically closest to them) at any cost, including the demolition of other citizens' rights. Or, still, it can alert those who suffer from the induced anxiety of saving the *polis* at any cost, even if it is political freedom. These individuals may end up supporting the rise to power, in a cynical or utilitarian way, of men who move in times of crisis within the boundaries of the democratic system with the intention of overthrowing it.

Last but not least, when the ethical and political problems of Theramenes' initiatives are combined with economic factors that may have supported them, the circumstances in which he acted may be considered from a new perspective. That the rich Athenians had more possibilities to be heading political affairs is a

[28] Dillery 1995, 147.

[29] *Hier.* 3.1-9. See Sevieri 2004; Gray 1986.

fact.[30] Gray (2004, 158), for instance, takes up Lysias' *Pro Mantitheo*, to discuss the judiciary sovereignty of the *demos* gathered in an assembly, but whose power would be limited to endorsing or rejecting policies promoted by wealthy citizens:

[a] modern theory would like the *demos* to be its own master and to acquire the knowledge of the political affairs through the day-to-day administration of the *demos*, or the council, or their committees, but even in the speeches in which he addresses the *demos* in court, Lysias (XVI 21) identifies those who "do politics" (πράττειν τὰ πολιτικά… πράττειν καὶ λέγειν ὑπὲρ τῆς πόλεως) with the rich; the role of the *demos* is not to do politics this way but to hold ultimate power in his capacity as "judge" (οὐ γὰρ ἕτεροι περὶ αὐτῶν κριταί εἰσιν, ἀλλ'ὑμεῖς) (transl. by the authors).

Grandson of the rich Nicias and son of Hagnon, who was a member of the Thirty alongside him, and an influential agent in the crucial decision-making processes of the Athenian democracy, Theramenes' actions can be taken as initiatives presented to the *demos* to serve the elite's interests, or proposals that were especially suitable to those who had proposed them rather than the people. Both in the distant past and today, such behavior has triggered or aggravated crises rather than effectively resolve them. The recurrence of so-called democratic leaders whose conduct is guided by their own interests should light up a bright warning sign everywhere—and we are not referring only to the (anti-) ethics implicit in such a stance.

This often causes fundamental democratic protocols such as civil and legal equality, or the universal right to justice, truth, free speech and defense to lose their guarantee within the democratic system. They are reconfigured to vague possibilities, in a process that functions to disguise the overwhelming predominance of economic power over collective decisions. In a similar way to that of contemporary democracies, the economic interests of a minority could be instrumentalized in their ancient counterparts, which would benefit, protect and legitimize itself through political debate and popular support. Ancient democracies, like contemporary democratic systems, would not exist without at least some prospect of democratization in the economic sphere with a view to social equity.

[30] On the problem of economic equality in Athenian democracy see Cartledge 1996; Raaflaub 1996, and chiefly Patriquin 2015, 82: "[i]f Athenian democracy teaches anything it is that struggle for relative equality on the 'material plane' is essential if we are to move beyond forms of public decision-making that disproportionately benefit society's elite. In short, economic democracy is a necessary prerequisite of political democracy. Without the former, the latter cannot exist". Patriquin's book echoes one of E. M. Wood central thesis: "[a]s long as direct producers remained free of purely 'economic' imperatives, politically-constituted property would remain a lucrative resource, as an instrument of private appropriation or, conversely, a protection against exploitation; and, in that context, the civic status of the Athenian citizen was a valuable asset which had direct economic implications. Political equality not only coexisted with, but substantially modified socio-economic inequality, and democracy was more substantive than 'formal'" (Wood 2012, 184). On the economic question around 411 and 404/3 see Ober 1989, 192-247; Pritchard 2015, 98-9; Sebastiani 2018a, 2018b.

Among the lessons that can be drawn from this framework for the contemporary democratic experience, it may still be worth bearing in mind what we can learn from a democracy that is as old as it is concealed in different instances and by different agents: that the lack of commitment towards an economic democracy (conveyed also as social and political) is equivalent to complacency, if not complicity, with forms of domination that hide beneath beautiful names easily legitimized by rhetorical charmers. Such neglect may entail purely cosmetic and superficial political changes, which better maintain the political predominance of those who have a lot to lose by tackling of one of the most complex political problems of all times: the hyper-concentration of economic instruments, an issue that is barely noticeable in the texts of ancient historians, yet frames the performance of leaders such as Theramenes and impacts on contemporary democracies. In this way, such leaders are often able to change sides or correct their own decisions, guided by an agenda of their own or their supporters, as the case of Theramenes seems to exemplify.

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